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# Enhancing the Use of Evaluation Findings in Organizations:

## Results of a Survey

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> Similar to the conundrum, "If a tree falls in the forest and nobody hears it, did it make a sound?" one may ask, "If a product/ program/process is evaluated, but the information is not considered, did an evaluation actually occur?"
>
> --- M. Alkin. *Debates on Evaluation* (1990), 20.

## 1.0 Introduction

Not all evaluations result in change despite the fact that evaluation's primary reason-for-being is to provide information for decision making. Although controversy abounds over an exact definition of evaluation, there is no doubt that evaluation is intended to invoke action by assessing the effectiveness of a project or program and by offering suggestions as to how operations could be improved.[1] The time and resources invested in conducting an evaluation can be wasted if implementing its recommendations is never considered. Increasing the chances of an organization utilizing the findings of an evaluation has long been a concern among evaluators. The Evaluation Unit of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) conducted a survey to gauge the problems facing evaluators as they attempt to overcome the underutilization of evaluation findings. Eighteen of the twenty-two international and national development and research organizations surveyed have an evaluation unit/division/section. (See Figure 1) Although it is impossible to ensure that all evaluation findings are used, what follows are the factors that survey respondents deemed to enhance the utilization of evaluation results. The respondents considered the existence of these factors to improve the possibility of evaluation findings being utilized while their absence could significantly hinder the chances. Despite the controversy over the differences between the terms *use* and *utilization*, they will be used interchangeably in this report as they were by the interviewees.

The purpose of the report is two-fold :

- to offer a synthesis of the main factors contributing to the enhancement of evaluation utilization in international development and research organizations as reported in the survey;
- to provide the participating organizations with an overview on utilization issues as perceived by organizations.

The findings of this report are of particular interest to evaluators and decision makers concerned with increasing the likelihood of evaluations results influencing action and, more generally, to staff members aiming to improve their organization's programs and projects.

**Figure 1: Responsibility**

**Who is responsible for undertaking the evaluation function in your organization?**

| | |
|---|---|
| Evaluation Unit/ Division/ Section | 18 |
| Individuals/ No Unit | 4 |

[1] Alkin, M.C. and R. Daillak and P. White eds. *Using Evaluations: Does Evaluation Make a Difference?* p.14.

## 2.0 Methodology

The information contained in this report was gathered through a telephone survey with representatives from 22 international and national development and research organizations[2], and by examining the relevant literature on the topic. Please see Appendix A: Questionnaire; Appendix B: Organizations Surveyed; and, Appendix C: Bibliography.

Due to the nature of the topic and the type of survey conducted, a few qualifications regarding the report should be noted. The report does not purport to be a guide on how to increase the utilization of evaluation findings in an organization. Rather, it is intended as a general study of the issues involved from which you can begin to analyze the specific situation in your organization. Also, almost all of the respondents were working in evaluation and therefore have a certain stake in, and viewpoint regarding, the subject at hand.

**Figure 2: Influence**

**How often have your evaluations influenced the way in which your organization implements programs?**

| | |
|---|---|
| Always | 2 |
| Often | 10 |
| Sometimes | 3 |
| Seldom | 2 |
| Never | 0 |
| No Answer | 5 |

## 3.0 What is Utilization?

There is a great deal of debate among scholars over what constitutes utilization and how it can be measured. For the purposes of this report the broadest definition is accepted -- utilization implies both the direct application of evaluation findings so that there is an immediate, concrete, and observable effect, and the cumulative shaping of attitudes and/or viewpoints within an organization.

The decision to follow one program, use one strategy, or revamp one approach over another is obviously more impressive and easier to demonstrate than is the gradual shaping of thinking in a specific problem area, but both are the intended goals of evaluation research. Although the survey respondents were not asked specifically to define utilization, it is interesting to note that they, for the most part professional evaluators, seem to view "utilization" as a direct change. When asked to give an example of when evaluation results have been used in their organization, the interviewees all provided a case of a direct impact and none spoke of shaping attitudes. In terms of how often evaluations influence the way an organization implements programs, two respondents answered that they *always* have an influence, ten responded *often*, three replied *sometimes*, two stated *seldom*, and nobody answered that evaluations *never* have an influence (See Figure 2).

[2] This report contains no references to responses of individual interviewers or their organizations in adherence with the confidentiality of the survey.

## 4.0 Results of the Survey:

## 4.1 Dissemination of Information

When considering the factors that contribute to the use of evaluation results, disseminating the information to the relevant audience is crucial. Seventeen out of the twenty-two organizations surveyed rely primarily on traditional means of dissemination -- namely, reports, summaries, and newsletters. Although these methods allow for the presentation and circulation of information about an evaluation, they cannot ensure that the information is being read and acted upon. As a result, some organizations are experimenting with new technologies to make the information more readily accessible. For example, four organizations commented that they have created internal databases of evaluation findings that facilitate staff searches and four organizations are using Web pages to reach a broader audience.

In his article, "Evaluation Utilization and Communication", John Owen cautions evaluators about relying on a giant, final report. Instead, he encourages evaluators to take a proactive approach and inform stakeholders about the progress of the evaluation using a variety of forms throughout the process. Their familiarity and comfort with the goals, method, and findings of the evaluation can only increase the likelihood that results will be utilized.[3]

## 4.2 Revisiting Evaluation Findings

**Figure 3: Follow-up on Recommendations**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Once an evaluation is completed, is there a follow-up mechanism or procedure on evaluation recommendations?** | |
| Yes | 15 |
| No | 7 |
| **Of the 15 "Yes", Does it Work?** | |
| Yes | 7 |
| No | 4 |
| Not Implemented | 1 |
| No Answer | 3 |

Research on evaluation use emphasizes that within an organization, a procedure to follow-up whether, and how, evaluation research was used to affect change is beneficial for two main reasons. It keeps the dialogue open between evaluators and program and policy staff and it ensures that evaluation recommendations are not overlooked or forgotten. Only fifteen of the twenty-two interviewees stated that their organization had a follow-up procedure in place to revisit evaluation findings. (See Figure 3) The primary reasons offered by the respondents as to why the follow-up mechanism was working included: an "ongoing presence and continuous monitoring" in partner organizations; the evaluation unit being responsible for ensuring that individual departments act on recommendations; and, partner organizations being required to report how results were used to the donor organization. On the other hand, the main reasons why the follow-up procedure was seen not to be working were: shortage of time; change being too dependent on the director of the division at which the recommendations are aimed; lack of funds for the evaluation committee to meet; and, the belief, by management, that only policy and/or program staff are responsible for initiating the changes recommended.

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[3] Owen, John M. "Evaluation Utilization and Communication", 69.

## 4.3 Factors that Encourage the Use of Evaluation Findings

When asked to enumerate what type of support and/or resources would facilitate the use of evaluation recommendations in their organization, the respondents offered a variety of answers. Their comments have been broken down into organizational factors and factors that relate to the evaluation itself.

### A) Organizational Factors

#### 1) Active Management Support

> *"If management is serious about evaluation, then the products will be used."*
> --- Interviewee

The interest, active support, and involvement of management in the evaluation process was said to be one of the main indicators affecting whether evaluation findings would be utilized -- more than half of the respondents commented on this point (54.5%). The fact that the commitment of top management was considered essential to the implementation of evaluation findings is not surprising considering they generally are the decision makers. One respondent stated that evaluators should work to create a demand from senior management for evaluation findings as input for decision making.

Respondents pointed out that, in order to be willing to use the evaluation findings, senior management must trust the information. This requires a cooperative relationship between evaluators and decision makers whereby evaluation is seen as a part of the broader management system. Such a relationship also sets a positive tone throughout an organization so that the staff recognizes the importance and usefulness of evaluations and believes they should be taken seriously. In turn, this enhances the prestige of the evaluation function within an organization and ensures that evaluations are not just "decoration pieces" completed simply to fulfil an auditing requirement.

#### 2) Promotion of Evaluation Through a Learning Culture

> *"You have to create an appreciation within your organizational culture for the value of evaluation and not see it as a threat but see it as part of a learning philosophy."*
> --- Interviewee

Two-thirds of interviewees commented that the organizational culture affects whether evaluation results are utilized (36.3%). Creating an environment conducive to learning, open communication, and collegiality were cited as important in developing demand and respect for evaluation. This type of learning culture is not easy to establish and requires a serious commitment by all levels of the organization. An environment respectful of information and learning helps reduce the apprehension of staff when faced with change. Negative results from an evaluation do not have to be threatening if, as one respondent put it, they can be viewed as an, "opportunity to learn rather than something you try to cover up." One interviewee suggested that this requires that evaluators be viewed as part

of the team, contributing to the better management of programs and projects, not as outsiders working from an ivory tower. Two of the respondents considered there to be a lack of appreciation and acknowledgement of the value of the evaluation function within organizations. This, they felt, undermined the utilization of evaluation findings because staff often misunderstood the purpose of evaluations and sometimes viewed them as a threat. It was suggested that greater awareness about evaluation would make it seem less threatening.

> *"You don't just have to market the findings, you also have to market the function."* --- Interviewee

**B) Factors about the Evaluation Process**

Almost three-quarters of the respondents (73%) commented on at least one of the following five aspects of the evaluation process as affecting whether results are utilized:

**1) Type of Approach or Methodology**

Six interviewees favoured a participatory approach if the results of evaluation research are to be utilized. According to one respondent, "The learning is more profound if you get the people involved to participate in the process of evaluation than if they simply read the report." The participation of stakeholders and ensuring that their concerns and needs are met was deemed to be the best way to assure the relevancy of the evaluation. Knowing and working with the intended audience was also considered to help the evaluator determine the salient questions and issues that need to be addressed.

**2) Timing**

Timing is extremely important if the results of an evaluation are to be utilized to affect change and six respondents identified it as a main factor. As one of them put it, "If you come up with the right recommendations at the wrong time nobody cares." It was suggested that evaluations be conducted at a point when changes can be made with relative ease or when results can be linked to decisions about resource allocation. Oftentimes, this requires that evaluations be completed quickly. For example, if an evaluation is completed at the end of a project cycle then the next phase can be redesigned in light of the evaluation findings.

**3) Quality of the Data**

One respondent described evaluations as the "final brick in the wall" because they often make recommendations that are already known to those involved in the project or program. However, evaluations provide the concrete information and analysis that legitimize these established beliefs and offer the evidence justifying change. Five interviewees commented that it is essential that evaluations contain high-quality findings, based on sound research, and are not biased by personal opinion, institutional viewpoints, or politics. As findings can have a significant impact, it was felt that evaluators must be rigorous in gathering and analysing the information if it is to be useful. One

respondent estimated that evaluations were 80-90% on track in terms of the quality of the data gathered.

**4) Recommendations Consistent with an Organization's Operating Context**

Six respondents commented that evaluations should be pragmatic if they are to be utilized. Accordingly, an evaluation should include clear, practical alternatives, and should be presented in an articulate and concise manner so that results can be easily studied. Although it was felt that proposing new alternatives is essential to evaluation, totally unrealistic recommendations serve no function. Furthermore, the evaluator should always keep in mind the resources available and should clearly indicate if recommendations will require significant extra fund.

**Figure 4: Learning from Evaluation**

**Has the knowledge from past experiences with evaluations influenced the way the evaluation function is carried out?**

| | |
|---|---|
| Yes | 16 |
| No | 1 |
| No Answer | 5 |

**5) The Evaluator**

Two interviewees commented that issues related to the evaluator can affect the utilization of evaluation results. They stated that an objective person, comfortable with evaluation methodologies, and skilled in evaluation was required in order to complete the job properly. One interviewee stated that evaluation requires people trained as evaluators rather than generalists. On a related issue, a respondent commented that, in international projects, the quality of an evaluation and its potential usefulness can be enhanced if the evaluator is grounded in the area where the projects are being carried out because they are more familiar with the context, language, and culture. This indicates that evaluators are continuously improving their methodologies and techniques and sixteen respondents stated that experiences with prior evaluations had influenced the way the evaluation function is carried out in their organization while only one interviewee responded that it had had no influence. (See Figure 4).

## 5.0 Conclusion

The main findings of the survey conform with the issues addressed in the relevant literature. According to the survey, there are two organizational factors and five factors related to the evaluation that can enhance the likelihood that evaluation findings will be utilized:

**Organizational Factors**

- Managerial Support
- Promotion of Evaluation Through a Learning Culture

**Factors Related to the Evaluation**

- Participatory Approach
- Timely
- High Quality and Relevant Data
- Consistent with Organizational Context
- Skilled Evaluator

In conclusion, these factors support the view of one author that, "The use of evaluation is a process, not an event" that requires both a supportive management within a nurturing environment, and an accurate, relevant, and timely evaluation.[4] The purpose of this report was to present information and encourage discussion on evaluation utilization within international and national development and research organizations. However, further research will have to be conducted on specific cases when evaluations were used to foster change if we are to better understand this complex topic.

[4] Hall, Gene. "Viewing Evaluation Utilization as an Innovation", 188.

## Appendix A: Questionnaire

1) How often have your evaluations influenced the way in which your organization implements programs?

Always
Often
Seldom
Never

2) Who is responsible for undertaking the evaluation function?

3) Once an evaluation is completed, is there a follow-up mechanism or procedure on evaluation recommendations?

4) How do you determine whether your evaluations are having an influence on:

A) Project implementation?
B) Program implementation?
C) Organizational policy?

5) What evaluation studies have led to this influence? Please give a brief description of the study.

6) In your opinion, what are the main factors contributing to the results being used? Please explain.

7) What type of support/resources would facilitate use of evaluation recommendations?

8) Has the knowledge from past experiences with evaluations influenced the way the evaluation function is carried out?

9) Have you done any studies on utilization of evaluations? If so, please explain.

10) How are results disseminated within the organization and outside the organization?

11) In your opinion, how can the utilization of evaluation results be encouraged?

## Appendix B: Organizations Surveyed

Aga Khan Foundation Canada

Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research

Board on Science and Technology for International Development

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation

Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation

Danish International Development Assistance

Food and Agriculture Organization

Ford Foundation

General Accounting Office - USA

International Development Research Centre

International Labour Organization

International Service for National Agricultural Research

Medical Research Council

National Research Council of Canada

Overseas Development Administration

Rockefeller Foundation

Swedish International Development Authority

United Nations Development Program

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

United Nations Population Fund

United Nations Industrial Development Organization

United States Agency for International Development

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